

Taking Stock of the Agent-Principal Challenges in the EU structural programs: the Case of the 'Extended University Programs' (PSE) in Greece (1997-2006)

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Αντιπροσωπεία στην Ελλάδα

Beyond "Absorption": The Impact of EU Structural Funds on Greece



Panagiotis Liargovas, Sotiris Petropoulos,
Nikolaos Tzifakis and Asteris Huliaras

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Taking Stock of Agent-Principal Challenges in EU structural programmes: The Case of the 'Extended University Programmes' (PSE) in Greece (1997–2006)

Maria Mendrinou and Nikolaos Tzifakis

1. Introduction


The gradual broadening of the EU cohesion's scope in new policy areas has increased the complexity of policy-making at the national level. In this context, the paper seeks to contribute to the enrichment of the analytical tools employed for the study of the implementation of EU structural and cohesion funds. In particular, it aims to improve our understanding of EU cohesion policy through the utilization of the principal-agent model. Our paper focuses on the sub-state part of the EU cohesion policy's contract chain and, more specifically, on a single case study: the 'Extended University Programmes' (Programmata Spoudon Epilogis, PSE), that were organized to support lifelong higher education in Greece. The case selected fulfils a number of aims. First of all, it concerns a policy area that is acknowledged for its domestic salience. Emerging issues in educational policy often display a high degree of controversiality and appear contentious to the general public. Moreover, education policy is governed by multiple stakeholders that constitutionally enjoy wide margins of autonomy and discretion. In addition, it is a policy domain under national responsibility that has been increasingly influenced by policy areas belonging to the central core of EU competences, such as the internal market. Education was introduced into EU cohesion policy objectives at a later stage and has had a legal framework not akin to the predominant policy areas of the EU structural and cohesion funds. Last, but not least, the main difficulties and strains that were experienced in those programmes' implementation were not mainly related to fraudulent or penal behaviour.

The paper is organized in the following way. The first section presents the dominant analytical device, the multi-level governance model, that has been applied so far for the study of EU cohesion policy. The paper sketches out the model's main strengths and deficiencies and argues for a need for its further refinement. The second section elaborates on the principal-agent model and briefly analyses the main findings from its sporadic employment in the study of cohesion policy. The third section turns to the case study suggested to test the utility of the principal-agent model for approaching the main aspects of EU cohesion policy: the 'Extended University Programmes' (PSE) in Greece. The paper concludes with some findings on both the case study per se, and the prospective application of the principal-agent model to the area of EU structural policy.

2. The multilevel governance model

The 1988 reform of EU structural policy triggered a debate in the field of EU studies that culminated in the articulation of the multilevel governance model. The focal points in the debate (led by Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe) were the strengthening of the Commission's role in cohesion policy and, more importantly, the introduction of the partnership principle. The latter previewed the establishment of 'close consultations' between the Commission, the member states concerned and the respective competent national, regional or local authorities in those states for the preparation, implementation and assessment of programmes (Council Regulation 2052/88, 12). Gary Marks observed that these reforms raised important questions about 'the distribution of authority and decision-making power across the Community, member states, and regional governments' (1992: 192). In addition, the unmediated interaction between the Commission and the regional institutions was perceived to have increased EU supranational authority over regional policy, thus challenging the monopoly of state-level institutions over intergovernmental relations (Marks, 1992: 221).

The Maastricht Treaty advanced further the scope of these reforms, indicative of which were the founding of the Committee of the Regions, and the multiplication of the channels of direct interaction and influence between EU and regional institutions as well as between sub-state institutions of different EU members (Hooghe and Marks, 1996). In this respect, the reforms to regional policy were portrayed as setting off a 'centrifugal process' in which decision-making authorities devolved from the national level to both EU institutions upwards and regional institutions downwards (Marks, 1993: 402; Hooghe



and Marks, 1996: 91). Thus, Gary Marks observed the emergence of multilevel governance, i.e. 'a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers – supranational, national, regional, and local – as the result of a broad process of institutional creation and decisional reallocation' (1993: 392).

The model's central tenet that concerns the diminution of the role of state-level institutions in cohesion policy has generated some debate. Several analysts have asserted that multilevel governance underestimated the gate-keeping role of member states over cohesion policy, whereas others observed the gradual renationalization of this field of policy over successive programme periods (see inter alia Allen, 2005; Bache, 1999; Pollack, 1995). John Bachtler and Carlos Mendez took the middle ground and claimed that the empowerment of supranational institutions and sub-state actors had not taken place at the expense of state-level institutions, and thus jurisdiction and authority in EU cohesion policy should not be regarded through the prism of a 'zero-sum game' (2007: 557). In other words, as Simona Plattoni put it, the improvement in the policy-making capabilities of EU and sub-state actors would not bring about 'a redefinition of the institutional or even constitutional set-up of the member-states' (2010: 128).

To be fair, the architects of the multilevel governance model soon clarified that they did not deny the preeminent role of state-level institutions in EU politics (see Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996: 346; Hooghe and Marks, 2001: 3). They instead argued that central governments have been increasingly sharing decision-making competencies with both supranational and sub-state institutions. They also put forward the idea that different political arenas (i.e. European, national and regional/ local arenas) were so interconnected within the EU that traditional distinctions between domestic and international politics were becoming irrelevant (Marks, Hooghe and Blank, 1996: 346–7; Hooghe and Marks, 2001: 3–4).


Gary Marks and Liesbet Hooghe have indeed aspired to present much more than merely an explanation of the operation of cohesion policy. Through their conceptual framework, they sought to offer an account of EU decision-making (Bache and Flinders, 2004: 2) and an alternative view of EU integration that revolves around the idea of the emergence of a 'multilevel polity' (Hooghe and Marks, 1996: 74). In this regard, the multilevel governance model represented an attempt to offer a breakthrough in the traditional debate of EU studies about intergovernmentalism and supranationalism.

The multilevel governance model contributed to the comprehension of the complexity of decision-making and policy implementation in the field of cohesion policy. It also highlighted the 'spatial distinctions' and 'geographical separations' among a series of interconnected actors, and thus it brought into evidence the dispersion of political authority (Stephenson, 2013: 817, 820). The model's influence has indeed radiated into the world of policy-making as it has been demonstrated by the decision of the Committee of the Regions to set up a series of 'ateliers' on multilevel governance (Committee of the Regions, n.d.; Stephenson, 2013: 822).

Notwithstanding its descriptive strengths, the model also has serious analytical deficiencies and limitations. First of all, owing to its preoccupation with the vertical interaction between public authorities located at different levels of government, the model fails to account for the role and influence of non-governmental actors (Faludi, 2012: 200–204). Furthermore, its underlying 'territorialism' and 'Russian doll' approach to governance denote a neglect of the formation of networks along administrative boundaries (Faludi, 2012: 204–207). More importantly, the model does not bring to light any causality, nor does it have any predictive power (Stephenson, 2013: 818). To the extent that it does not explain the relative leverage of each level of public authority, the model gives the impression that it considers 'involvement' as equivalent to 'governance' (Blom-Hansen, 2005: 628). The next section attempts to apply the principal-agent model to the corpus of knowledge of the multilevel governance model, aiming to remedy many of the aforementioned analytical problems.

3. The principal-agent model

The principal-agent model was developed in the field of organizational economics to analyze intra-firm relations. However, owing to its far-reaching analytical potential, it was soon utilized to explicate all kinds of contractual relations, that is to say, any relationship in which 'one party, the principal, considers entering into a contractual agreement with another, the agent, in the expectation that the agent will



subsequently choose actions that produce outcomes desired by the principal' (Moe, 1984: 756). Typical examples include employer-employee or client-service provider relationships. A principal may resort to the solution of contracting out to an agent for a variety of reasons, such as cost efficiency considerations, lack of necessary expertise and so forth (Kassim and Menon, 2003: 123–124).


The model's main contribution lies in its ability to explain the two most common problems that principals may encounter in this type of relationships. The first is adverse selection: a principal cannot know with certitude the genuine preferences (and capabilities) of candidate agents whose opportunity costs are definitely lower than the compensation offered. The second is moral hazard: a contracted agent may eventually not advance the principal's interests with the utmost efficiency. Both of these problems are related, on the one hand, to the misalignment of interests between the principal and the agent, and, on the other, to the disadvantageous position of the principal vis-à-vis the agent in terms of knowledge and information about the agent's true preferences and actions (the so-called 'information asymmetry').

The model, apart from its ability to diagnose the cause of inefficiencies in contracted actions, is able to prescribe solutions to the adverse selection/moral hazard problems. In a nutshell, principals are prompted to decide carefully with regard to the following considerations: which types of actions/services may be contracted out; how agents are selected; how the contract agreement can shape the agent's incentive structure (and deter agent shirking); and last but not least, how contract monitoring can be efficient (Moe, 1984: 759; Blom-Hansen, 2005: 629).

The model has also gained some currency in the study of relationships that do not have a purely economic transactional component per se. For instance, Terry Moe observed the formation of a chain of principal-agent relationships in democracies, starting from the citizens, the ultimate principals, going next to elected politicians, who have the dual role of being simultaneously the people's agents and the principals of state bureaucracy, and so forth all the way down to the agents delivering services directly to the citizens (1984: 761–766). Similarly, in the field of development studies, several analysts have remarked on the existence of a long chain of principals and agents commencing from the taxpayers in donor countries and ending with the beneficiaries in aid-recipient countries (Bartlett, 2013: 334; Araral, 2009: 854–856). Interestingly, neither principals nor agents are necessarily single unitary actors. For instance, interest groups and state agencies may compete with elected politicians to exert influence on the work of bureaucracy (Waterman and Meier, 1998: 179). And different agents within state agencies may compete at the stage of policy implementation (Waterman and Meier, 1998: 181). Therefore, the longer and more complicated the chain of principals and agents, the greater will be the possibility that interests might be misaligned at some intermediate points of principal-agent interaction, rendering highly improbable the efficient accomplishment of the ultimate principals' original objective(s) (Bartlett, 2013: 346).

The principal-agent model represents a valuable addition to the multilevel governance model. It builds on the latter's main premise about the fragmentation of decision-making and policy implementation across different levels, while it simultaneously moves forward the debate to explicate the distribution of power and configuration of interests among all the actors involved. Moreover, the principal-agent model adds flexibility to the multilevel governance analytical framework by generating the space necessary for the study of the role in policy making of multiple non-governmental actors ranging from private corporations and pressure groups to individuals. As a result, the principal-agent model is appropriate to analyze complex inter-institutional arrangements and exchanges, such as those pertaining to the operation of the European Union (Kassim and Menon, 2003: 125).

Over recent years, one might have noticed a steady growth in the EU studies literature that has employed the principal-agent model to account for the operation of different European organs, such as the European Commission (Pollack, 1997), the European Central Bank (Elgie, 2002), the European Environment Agency (Zito, 2009) and the European External Action Service (Henökl, 2014). The model has also been applied to the study of different EU policy areas, such as foreign economic policy (Dür and Elsig, 2011), employment policy (de la Porte, 2011), foreign development assistance (Bartlett, 2013) and migration policy (Menz, 2014). Nonetheless, the principal-agent model has not dominated analyses of EU cohesion policy where the crux of the matter is the study of contractual relations. Strangely, there are very few theoretical or empirical applications from a principal-agent perspective. Yet, most of these studies have yielded some very interesting findings.



In particular, Jens Blom-Hansen (2005) used the model to investigate the European Commission's ability to control member states in the field of EU cohesion policy. The analyst demonstrated that the Commission cannot remedy the adverse selection problem since member states are by definition its agents (Blom-Hansen, 2005: 630). Furthermore, the Commission does not have sufficient powers to prevent the appearance of the moral hazard problem either. Under EU cohesion policy, member states have a very broad mandate consisting of non-binding and hard to verify principles, such as additionality and innovation (Blom-Hansen, 2005: 631-633). More importantly, whereas the EU has set up several monitoring mechanisms (such as national monitoring committees, ex-ante, mid-term and ex-post evaluations and reports, and investigations by the European Court of Auditors), the European Commission is in a weak position to sanction non-criminal agent drift (Blom-Hansen, 2005: 634-637). Likewise, Michael Bauer has highlighted the dual role of the Commission in the area of cohesion policy, being simultaneously the agent of the Council, the European Court of Auditors and the European Parliament, and also the principal/supervisor of member-state policy implementation (2006: 723-731).

The study by John Bachtler and Martin Ferry (2013) assessed the impact of the quantitative conditionalities that were introduced in the 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods with the aim of improving member-state compliance with cohesion policy goals. The two analysts found that the Commission's attempt to mould the incentive structure of member states had had mixed results. EU members had complied very well with the 'decommitment rule' (previewing that payments for projects should be completed within two years of the year of commitment), and thus the absorption of structural funds improved spectacularly (Bachtler and Ferry, 2013: 5-7). However, many EU countries have applied the 'performance reserve', which stipulates the reallocation of funds within member states from underperforming programmes to the most successful ones, inconsistently. Moreover, some EU members have managed to add flexibility to the implementation of the 'earmarking principle' introduced in the 2007-2013 period with the intention of increasing the share of funds directed to the stimulation of growth and employment (Bachtler and Ferry, 2013: 7-11). John Bachtler and Martin Ferry explicated the variations in the degree of compliance of member states with these conditionalities by making reference to the distribution of interests among EU institutions and member states (2013: 12-13).

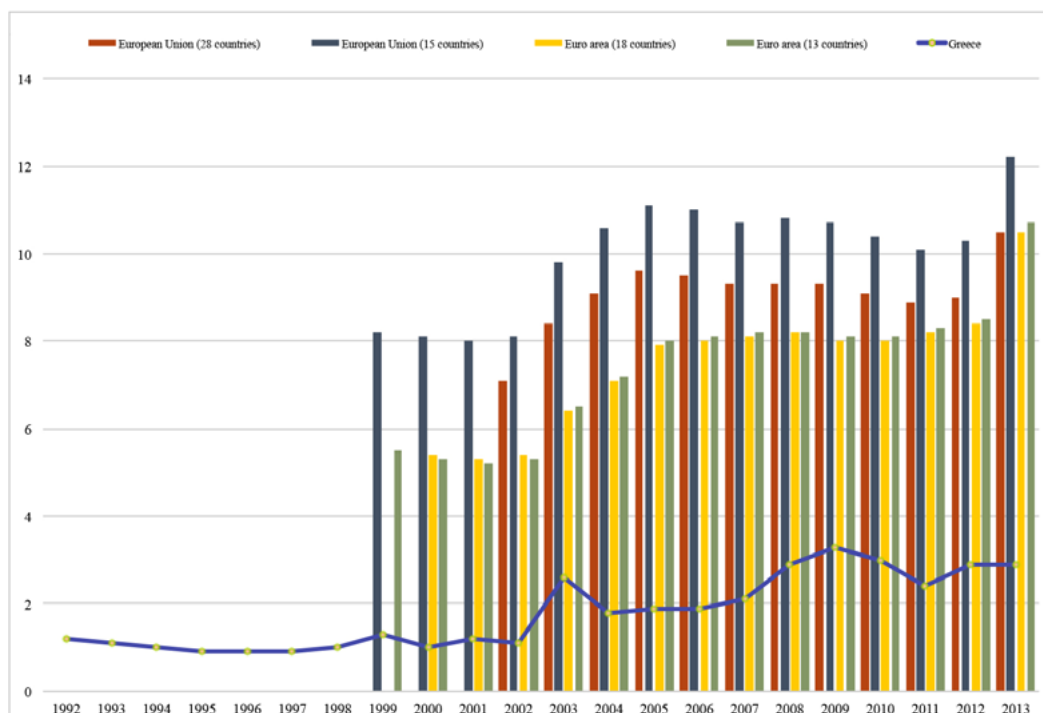
What most studies of EU cohesion policy from a principal-agent perspective have in common is an almost exclusive preoccupation with the interaction between the Commission and member states. Strangely, it seems that there is very little research interest in other parts on the EU cohesion policy contract chain. A notable exception is the study by Károly Mike and Gábor Balás (2014) that examined how states, as principals, select their agents to implement EU-funded programmes. The two authors argue that the choice is usually between establishing new single-purpose managing authorities (and intermediate bodies) at different levels and parts of their national/regional bureaucracies on the one hand, and relying on existing organizations within their national/regional administration, on the other. Whereas the former choice reflects a preoccupation with compliance with EU rules and financial absorption, the latter might signify a concern with policy efficiency (Mike and Balás, 2014: 25-27). This is because good performance in terms of meeting measurable short-term indicators in EU-funded programmes does not necessarily imply an incremental genuine advancement in (frequently hard-to-quantify) medium-term national policy objectives (Mike and Balás, 2014: 17-23). To be sure, states have usually adopted 'hybrid' solutions that combine elements from both of the aforementioned 'ideal types' of solutions. Still, their overall inclination towards either end of the continuum (i.e. new single-purpose structures and existing agencies) seems to indicate a hierarchical prioritization between the objectives of financial absorption and policy efficiency (Mike and Balás, 2014: 25-27). The tension between these objectives is further noticed in the way states designate contracts, or more precisely, whether they rely on ordinarily-used procurement/contracting solutions or opt for an overt projectification of EU-funded programmes (Mike and Balás, 2014: 28-30). Therefore, several decisions by states as principals for the national implementation of EU cohesion policy are telling of the extent to which EU goals and assessment indicators are aligned well to national priorities and procedures.

Having briefly discussed the principal-agent model and some findings from its application in EU cohesion policy, the next section turns to our case study, the 'Extended University Programmes' (PSE) in Greece. It presents the content of these programmes and it accounts for some of the hurdles in their implementation. By bringing to the surface divergent sub-national interests with respect to those programmes' operation, we attempt to make a contribution to the comprehension of additional aspects of the EU cohesion policy contract chain.

4. The 'Extended University Programmes' in Greece

In the Second Community Support Framework (CSF, 1994–99), the Greek government introduced a programme called the 'Operational Programme for Education and Early Vocational Training'.¹ The Greek government took advantage of the expanding scope of EU Structural and Cohesion Funds to other policy fields (Council Regulations 2083/93 and 2084/93) to advance aspects of Greek educational policy that lagged behind in a number of areas, such as research, graduate studies and lifelong learning. The decision was consistent not only with developments in EU structural and cohesion policy, but also with the general EU directions that prompted the advancement of cooperation in the policy area of education.² By enhancing the scope of the cohesion programmes to include policy fields like that of higher education, it was anticipated that new structures and services would be developed, while those already in place would be reformed to encompass the new needs. More importantly, Greece was a latecomer to and an underachiever in the targets set for widening the access to lifelong learning compared to the EU as a whole (Figure 1). The situation has been much more pronounced in the case of tertiary education (Figure 2), in part as a result of the General Entry Examination system applied, and in part due to the relatively early, yet binding choice, that young people have to make regarding their prospective field of studies.

Figure 1: The Greek case on the participation rate in education and training (last four weeks) for the age group 25–64 (in percentage) in comparative perspective.

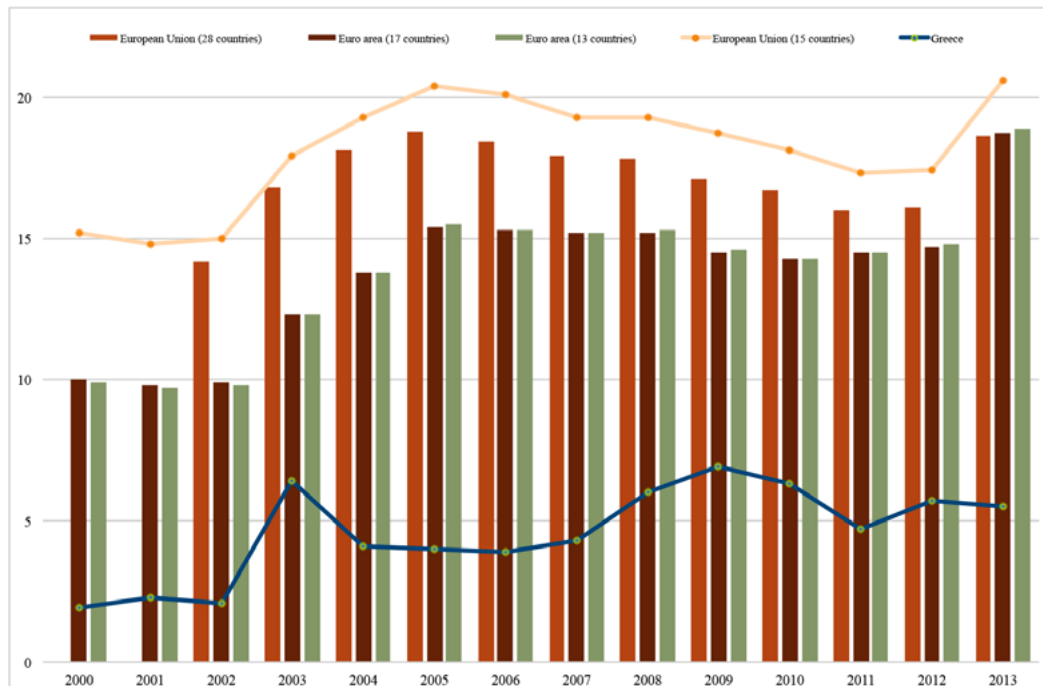


Source: Compiled from the Eurostat.

¹For the Structural and Cohesion Funds of the period 1994–1999, Greece was identified as an Objective 1 case since economic development in the country was lagging well behind the EU average. The total allocations for Greece were 13,980 million ECUs at 1994 prices, of which around 9% was earmarked for Community initiatives (see European Commission, 1996).

²The Treaty of Maastricht for the first time explicitly introduced a widening of the cooperation options among EU member states, involving also the area of education (see Arts. 3p and 126, TEC). It was a pivotal development that paved the way for the introduction of new modes of EU governance such as the 'Open Method of Coordination' (OMC). It should be noted that from the 1990s onwards, the developments between European countries that set in motion the formation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010 had been considerable. From then on, the 'complementary', according to the Lisbon Treaty (Art. 6, TFEU), policy areas in the EU kept evolving. Ruled by soft law and targets set by member states, coordination under the mode of the OMC has since contributed to advancing EU cooperation in policy areas well beyond those of the Treaties' core.

Figure 2: The Greek case on the participation rate in tertiary education and training for the age group 25-64 (in percentage) in comparative perspective.



Source: Compiled from the Eurostat.

It was in this context that the 'Extended University Programmes' were introduced in 1997 (Law 2525/1997 and Ministerial Decision 6495/1997). The programmes were organized by Greek universities and technological educational institutes³ through a process of competitive bidding for funding from the European Regional Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) that was administered by the Greek Ministry of Education. The approval for programmes was conditional on both their compatibility with the aims set by the government and on their long-term feasibility and sustainability. The programmes' main aim was the establishment of a structure for lifelong learning in higher education that would, in a way, supplement the Hellenic Open University for Distance Advanced Learning, founded in 1992.

The programmes offered higher and continued education in the context of lifelong learning to all qualified graduates of secondary education in new and interdisciplinary fields. The enrolled students could either get a higher education degree upon successful completion of the full academic curriculum (whose duration exceeded the four-year cycle of regular university degree programmes) or receive a certificate of attendance for selected courses. Enrolment was competitive and based on criteria set by law and the number of places available. Although the enrolment process was different from that for the General Entry Examinations, it took into consideration the applicants' performance in exams in all cases, except for two categories. The first concerned those who were already holders of a university degree, and second was the case of those who had not taken exams but had a certified secondary degree; in total these two categories accounted for 20 per cent of the available places. The legal framework was particularly thorough regarding eligibility criteria and categories (Art. 4, para. 5, Ministerial Decision 6495/1997) and was further explicated by the legal framework of each individual programme (see inter alia Art. 2 para. 9, Ministerial Decision B1/580/1998).

³ In Greece, higher education is public and provided by the universities and technological educational institutes. Although there is no provision for private tertiary education, since the late 1980s, a number of private providers under a franchising arrangement with universities abroad (mainly British and American) have been active in Greece offering tertiary education. They have been covered by the 'freedom to provide services' and are supervised by the Ministry of Commerce rather than that of Education.

Table 1: Criteria and quotas by category for enrollment in the Programs according to Ministerial Decision 6495/1997

Categories of Enrolment	Secondary Education – Entry Examination	Students in Universities Abroad	Students in Greek Higher Education	University Graduates	Others – Secondary Education – No Entry Examination
Categories	I	II	III	IV	V
Quotas	45%	20%	15%	10%	10%
General Grade in Secondary Education	✓	✓	✓		✓
Average Grade in General Entry Examinations	✓	✓	✓		
Years of Unemployment	✓			✓	✓
Years of Employment	✓			✓	✓
Years of Post-secondary Education	✓				✓
Number of Courses Completed in Higher Education		✓	✓		
Average Grade in Higher Education			✓		
Grade in Higher Education				✓	

Shortly afterwards, the legal framework of the PSE was contested in court (Council of State) and found to be unconstitutional in several respects. In a nutshell, it was considered to violate the principle of equality as admission to a PSE was not linked to successful participation in the General Entry Exams; it erroneously put universities and technological educational institutes on an equal footing; and it was established by a ministerial decision instead of a presidential decree (see Panaretos, 1999 for a brief discussion of the Council of State's Decision 2820/1999). Furthermore, many opponents and critics of the programmes argued that the introduction of tuition fees for all students aged over 25 years represented an additional violation of the constitutional provision for free-of-charge higher education. Following the court's (Council of State) ruling, the Ministry of Education enacted a new law in parliament that strove to remedy most of the problems (Law 2752/1999). For instance, the programmes' reformed legal framework emphasized that their objective was to provide lifelong learning education (as opposed to conventional education), and thus it stipulated that the PSE should prioritize the admission of students aged over 23 years (Art. 1, para. 9). The Council of State ruled that the new law attempted to annul the court's previous decision and pronounced the programmes' new legal framework unconstitutional too (Decision 2581/2000; see also Contiades, 2001). As a result, the PSEs suspended the enrolment of new students and continued their operation only with respect to students already registered so that the latter could complete their studies. In mid-2005, the Ministry of Education announced the termination of the PSE at the end of the academic year 2005/6 (Art. 11, para. 2, Law 3369/2005).

Following the court's second ruling, the Ministry of Education addressed the demand for lifelong learning by directing its efforts towards distance-learning providers that were quite different from the conventional higher education programmes. In particular, the Hellenic Open University is in the mainstream in Greek higher education for those aged over 25 years who wish to enrol for a university degree, whereas the Centres for Continued Education and Training, that were developed in the context of the Second 'Operational Programme for Education and Early Vocational Training' (2000–2006), offer a great variety of e-learning programmes. Furthermore, in 2005, the Ministry of Education offered the

universities and technological educational institutes the possibility of creating an additional structure, i.e. Institutes of Lifelong Learning (Art. 9, Law 3369/2005). Thus, the demand for studies in extended university programmes has been channelled into other competing structures similarly funded by the ERDF, the ESF and Greek national resources in accordance with the CSF's rules.

It is certain that the decision of the Greek government to promote lifelong learning as part of its educational policy was reasonable and in agreement with the aims of EU cohesion policy. Indicative is the number of applications received by the PSE of the University of Athens that was organized by four university departments and the National School of Public Administration. The programme in its first offer of 250 places received 4,060 applications. The demand⁴ came mainly from graduates of secondary education, yet a considerable number of those wished to enrol for a second university degree (Table 2).

Table 2: Number of applications by call for the PSE organized in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and rate of enrollment by category of beneficiaries

		1998	1999	2000
No of Applications	Quota	4060	3202	3022
Secondary Education – Entry Examination	45%	1:19,48	1:13,25	1:10,99
Students in Universities Abroad	20%	1:1,24	1:1,00	1:7,50
Students in Greek Higher Education	15%	1:2,47	1:1,58	1:10,82
University Graduates	10%	1:23,15	1:19,48	1:11,04
Others – Secondary Education – No Entry Examination	10%	1:40,04	1:33,86	1:11,13
Total	100%	1:15,92	1:12,46	1:10,99

Source: The PSE on Human Resource Management and Administration, University of Athens, Evaluation Report, 1998-2000, unpublished report.

Table 3: Number of PSE organized, number of participating Departments, and distribution of Programs between Universities and Technological Educational Institutes

Area of Study	No of PSE	No of Universities (HEI)	No of Technological Institutes (TEI)	No of Departments
Humanities	7	13 (2 from abroad)		14 & 1 group of academics
Sciences	4	5		6
Economics - Administration	6 (2 HEI & 4 TEI)	2 (NSPA)	5 (1 from abroad)	14
Technology	9 (2 HEI & 7 TEI)	2	7	18 & 3 groups of academics
Environment	6 (3 HEI & 3 TEI)	7 (4 from abroad)	5	16 & 1 group of academics
TOTAL	32 (18 HEI & 14 TEI)	29 (6 from abroad)	17 (1 from abroad)	68 & 5 groups of academics

⁴It is estimated that around 75 per cent of the applications received by the University of Athens are in categories I and V, see Table 1.

There was similar demand for other PSE. As Table 3 shows, 32 programmes were established, 18 in universities and 14 in technological educational institutes. Most of the programmes were interdisciplinary and tended to involve several partners, such as academic departments (within universities and technological institutes, or involving various higher education institutions in Greece and abroad), other organizations and groups of teaching staff. In all cases, the studies offered by the programmes had to be innovative and not on offer by other higher education institutions in Greece. There was also a considerable regional distribution of the programmes to cover almost all Greek regions (see Table 4). In the first year of their operation (1998), more than 3,500 students were enrolled, while the number of interested applicants was considerably higher. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, the programmes failed to take root as new structures in Greek higher education and managed to complete their task solely in relation to students (end beneficiaries) who successfully completed their studies and graduated up until 2006.⁵

Table 4: Regional Distribution of the PSE

No of Programs	City in which the Program was located	Regions
3	Athens	Attica
3	Piraeus	
7	Thessaloniki	Central Macedonia
3	Chania	Crete
4	Heraklion	
3	Ioannina	Epirus
3	Volos	Thessaly
1	Mytilene	North Aegean
1	Patras	Western Greece
1	Kavala	East Macedonia & Thrace
2	Kozani	West Macedonia
1	Kalamata	Peloponnese
32	12	10 of 13

The principal-agent model appears to be particularly valuable in explicating the initial success and rapid demise of the PSE in the context of EU structural and cohesion funds in Greece.

The Ministry of Education, the main principal at the national level, apart from participating (along with EU authorities) in the shaping of the relevant legal framework, delegated the implementation of the programmes to the main national agents eligible to do so, the universities and technical education institutes. Although the introduction of a new programme in Greek higher education appeared to be a straightforward undertaking particularly since, in the Greek case, the choice of main agents was actually restricted to public higher education institutions, the ensuing complexities of implementing these EU cohesion programmes were uncompromising, leading just a few years after their introduction to their suspension.

However, the 'moral hazard' and 'adverse selection' concerns remain valid in the case under examination since the establishment of a PSE was decided by a competitive process of open calls. The 32 programmes approved were just a portion of the tenders submitted by the various universities and technological institutes. Whereas the overwhelming majority of the PSE ran smoothly, the most serious troubles emerged in just one higher education institution, the Polytechnic of Crete, where faculty members and students on conventional programmes were mobilized against the establishment of three programmes and twice made recourse to the Council of State (Rouggeri, 1998). Interestingly, it was also at the

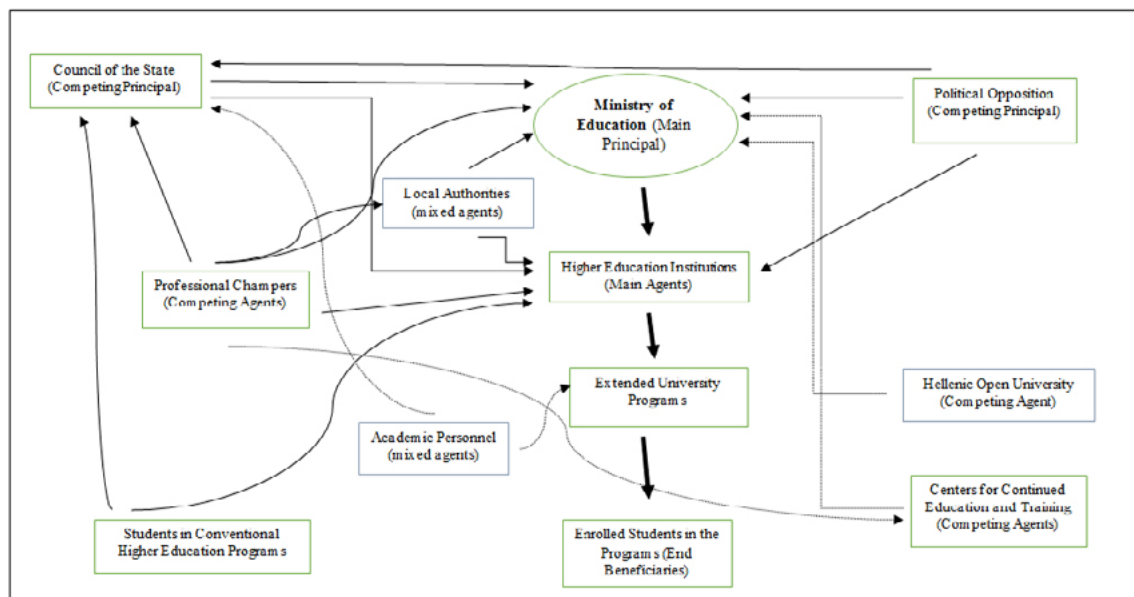
⁵The abrupt decision by the Ministry of Education in 2005 to terminate the programmes by the end of the next academic year implied that, for a very small number of courses, a group of students did not receive their degrees having failed to be successfully examined (in some cases they had even submitted their final dissertations) (EEO Group, 2009: 185).

Polytechnic of Crete that the university authorities were accused and found guilty of having been involved in very serious irregularities (Rouggeri, 1998; Kathimerini, 2004). Hence, the question of the operation of the three PSE at the Polytechnic of Crete put to the test the main concerns that have been advanced by the principal-agent model.

Moreover, the employment of the principal-agent model in the case of the PSE brings to the surface the existence of contradictory dynamics: one linked to the constitutionally-guaranteed autonomy and discretion that Greek higher education institutions enjoy, and another related to the 'vertical integration' (see inter alia Klein et al. 1978; Arrow 1975; Grossman and Hart 1986; Eisenhardt 1989) in the principal-agent relationship that binds the agent to compliance with the principal's terms in a hierarchical manner. It was indeed this aspect that contributed crucially to the failure of the programmes since any miscalculation by the principal impacted critically on the agent's compliance (e.g. the enrolment of students under 23 years old).


The complexity and, in a way, the novelty that the case of the PSE adds to the application of the principal-agent model in EU cohesion policy is related to the identification of a long array of agents, notably some 'mixed' (consisting of both beneficiaries/supporters and opponents), alongside competing agents. The struggle between beneficiaries and opponents, as the case of the PSE displays, shows that it may have a devastating impact on implementing the prospects for an EU structural/cohesion programme. Figure 3 offers a schematic graphical representation of the principal-agent model for the case of the PSE.

Figure 3: Graphical representation from the Principal-Agent perspective of the case of the PSE



The ministry in its initial choice in shaping the programmes faced two 'competing principals': the political opposition that criticized aspects of the programmes' legal framework and the Council of State⁶ that had the responsibility to review conformity with the constitution of administrative actions. Although part of the political opposition (the Communist Party of Greece, KKE) was particularly keen to bring to an end the programmes, even after their adoption by Parliament (see for instance Rizospastis, 1999b), this was eventually achieved through court rulings, following actions brought by opponents of the programmes. As a result, the government decided to adjust the main implementing agents, either by boosting the role of already existing competing agents, such as the Hellenic Open University, or by forming new ones, such as the Centres for Continued Education and Training. The latter incorporated both the main implementing agents of the programmes, higher education institutions, and on demand and according to expertise, other actors such as professional chambers.

⁶For a consideration of courts as competing principals, see Waterman, Wright and Rouse (1994), quoted in Waterman and Meier, 1998: 179.



While the PSE responded to an actual need for higher education lifelong learning, they also caused some concern to several agents and groups of actors. First of all, many students on conventional university programmes perceived the PSE as a threat and an injustice that jeopardized their career prospects and discredited their successful performance in the demanding and rather tedious process of the General Entry Examinations. Likewise, some professional chambers (e.g. the Chamber of Fine Arts of Greece) expressed their opposition to the programmes out of concern for the career opportunities of their members (Rouggeri, 1998; Rizospastis 1998 and 1999a).

From the case study we also discern a number of 'mixed' agents that contributed in a critical manner to the 'disjointed' implementation of the PSE. The two most prominent 'mixed agents' were the following: local authorities and societies, and academic personnel/faculty members.


The local authorities and societies constituted such a type of agent, since along with opposing approaches, they more often than not tended to support the decentralization of higher education in Greece. The regional distribution of the programmes (see Table 4) prompted a diverse stance on the matter that often triggered internal disputes in local societies. To illustrate, whereas the City Council of Chania pronounced its unanimous support for the continued operation of the three programmes at the Polytechnic of Crete (Rizospastis, 1999b), the Chania Bar Association sued the university's authorities in court, accusing them of being involved in several irregularities when setting up these programmes (Moulopoulos, 1998).

The academic personnel/faculty members were the other 'mixed agent' that the case study discerned. Teaching and supervision of the programmes were exclusively undertaken by academic personnel, either already employed by the university or having similar academic qualifications. The case of this 'mixed' agent was particularly complicated since faculty members are also involved in the administration of Greek higher education institutions. The decision to organize a PSE presupposed approval by the university organs in which the faculty members participated by law. At the same time, a considerable number of faculty members viewed the programmes: as structures competing with conventional departments; as a potential threat to the public character of higher education in Greece since the programs provided for fees for those over 25 years of age; and as a mean to increase the flexibility of university structures. A peculiarity and complexity of this 'mixed' agent was that, contrary to the external challenge of other adversaries, in this case controversy was internalized by the main agents, too. Thus, controversy regarding the programmes escalated the tension around their implementation within the everyday functioning of higher education institutions (Rouggeri, 1998).

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has tested the hypothesis of the analytical quality of the principal-agent model for investigating the complexities of the implementation of EU cohesion policy programmes at the national level. It has used as case study the PSE in Greece and demonstrated the model's analytical utility for empirical investigations of the sub-state part of the chain of policy-making actors. The paper argues that the actual failure of the PSE (and consequently of EU cohesion policy) to form a structure of lifelong learning in Greek higher education was not causally linked to any fraudulent or penal behaviour. It was instead the result of multiple misalignments of objectives of actors located at different parts of the contract chain, all the way down from the Commission to the final agents on the ground. In this respect, the case study presents the interplay among the main actors and stakeholders who stood in favour or in opposition to the operation of the PSE and elaborates some types of conflicts of interest that obstructed policy implementation.

The paper also remarks that, on occasion, the 'moral hazard' concern in the principal-agent model may be reversed, as well. In particular, as the investigation of the PSE shows, it was the poor design of programmes, with several unconstitutional provisions (e.g. principle of equal access to higher education) and the neglect of beneficiaries, that seriously compromised the effectiveness of EU cohesion funds. Notwithstanding that their legal framework has been challenged since 2000, the PSE kept running (without, though, new student enrolments) until 2006. Eventually, of the 6,000 students who enrolled on the PSE, many did not receive a degree as they failed to complete their studies in timely fashion, while the qualifications of some categories of graduates have yet to be certified (EEO Group, 2009: 185, 193 and 194).



The fact that the closure of the programmes coincided with the end of the third CSF (2000–2006) leads us to the assumption that the Ministry of Education prioritized quantifiable results within the CSF's timeframe (absorption of funds) rather than a genuine widening of access to higher education (policy efficiency). Indeed, Greece managed to absorb 94 per cent of the cohesion funds for lifelong learning of the Second 'Operational Program for Education and Early Vocational Training' up until the end of 2008 (EEO Group, 2009: 172). However, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, Greece has not succeeded equally in improving the participation rate of its people aged 25–64 years old in training and education.

To conclude, our case study demonstrates that the potential of the principal-agent model to explicate the complexity of EU cohesion policy has been underexplored thus far.

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